Beatrice. A Legend of Our Lady

Vertaald door: Harold de Wolf Fuller

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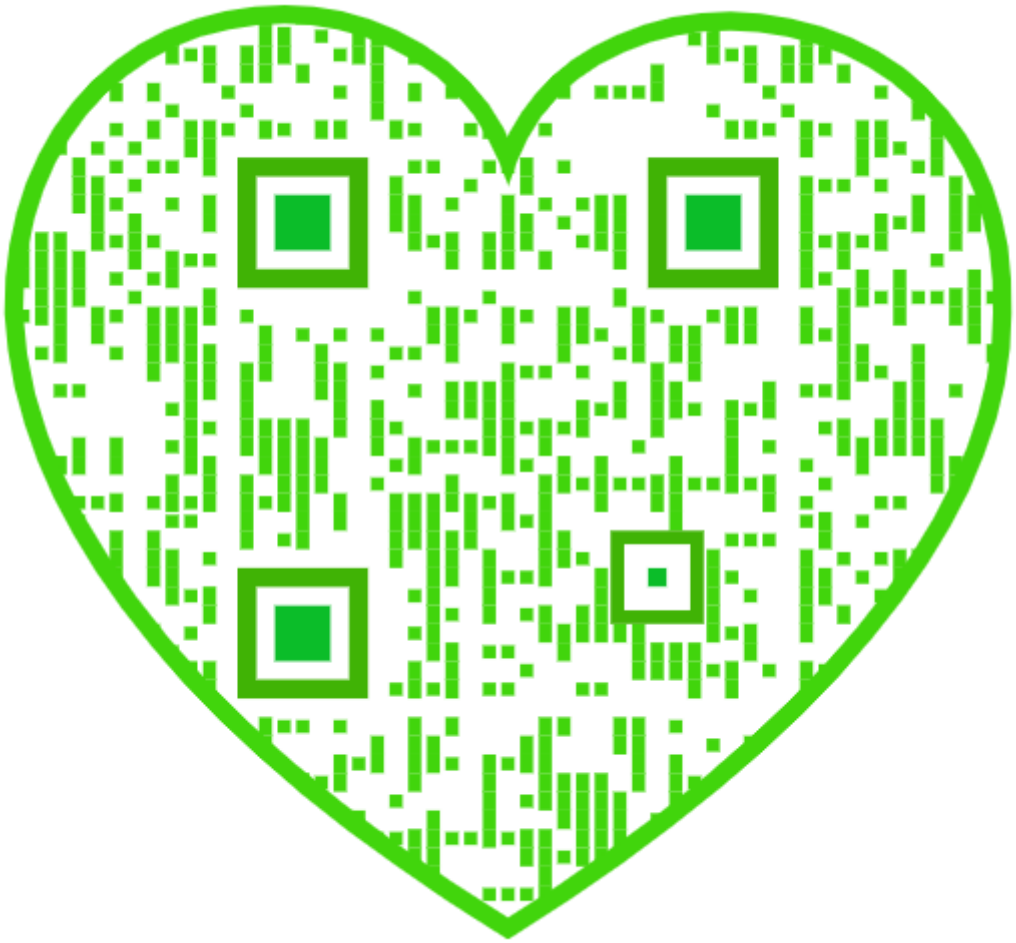

Preface

THE narrative that follows is a translation of what is perhaps the gem of mediaeval legends. Originating in France in the twelfth century, the story of Beatrice spread over a great part of western Europe, and survives to-day in versions almost too numerous to count. In the course of its journeying it came to the Netherlands and fell into the hands of a now forgotten monk living somewhere in Brabant. This was fortunate, for he proved to be a great poet, quite worthy of the possibilities which the story abundantly offered. By him this *conte dévot,* characterized at best by prettiness and naïveté, was at once transformed into a thing of great beauty and subtlety. Possessed of

no little metrical technique, and of an artistic restraint which at times seems almost classical, the writer brought above all to the legend a large, unerring humanity; and effected by this means a decided shift of dramatic emphasis. Heretofore the conflict between good and evil had been quite controlled by the Virgin and the devil. The author of the Netherlands retained these superhuman agencies, to be sure, but only as symbols, and brought into the foreground conflicting human emotions. His chief interest lay in the bitter struggle, in the life of his heroine, between overwhelming passion and ascetic religious devotion; and these he has so handled as almost to reconcile the two impulses. For in the midst of all this nun's worldly vicissitudes - at first frankly delirious, later wretched - the reader constantly feels her pervasive love of the Virgin and her thrill at the remembrance of her cloister life. To such an extent

do these assert themselves, that when at length she resumes her old position as sacristan, she seems scarcely less pure or less capable of performing her duties than at the beginning of the story. Meanwhile the reader has seen deep down into the soul's history of a profound woman. In short, the writer, for his time, is altogether remarkable for his sympathetic reading of the human heart, his calm painting of cause and effect, and for his optimistic belief in the final reassertion of the good.

In conclusion, just a word about the English translation. My chief object throughout has been fidelity to the Netherlandish. This, however, proved easier to propose than to attain, owing to the extreme felicity of the original; literal accuracy has at least been secured, though often at the expense of atmosphere and the music of the line. The metre, which I have attempted to reproduce

in English, is in general the octosyllabic couplet, the length of the line occasionally varying all the way from nine syllables to five, and the accents from four to three. The translation corresponds line for line with the original.

Verses 475-482, which in the present text ought to come between the lines

> 'And she withheld from further dole'

and

> 'Whenas the fourteen years were past,'

on p. 25, it has seemed best to omit entirely, since according to competent authority they appear to be a later insertion by some scribe or other. They contribute a sort of double summary at one point of the story, which is not at all in the spirit of the author. To avoid the charge of negligence, however, I insert them here:

'For the space of fourteen years, that I tell

you truly. She was seven years with a man, who won two children of her and left her in want, whereby she suffered great mishap. The first seven years have ye heard recounted: list how she lived henceforth.'

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[Beatrice]

FROM MAKING COMES ME LITTLE STORE:
FOLK REDE ME THAT I GIVE IT O'ER,
NOR AUGHT MY HAPLESS WIT BESTIR;
YET FOR THE GOODNESS GREAT OF HER
WHO MOTHER AND MAID HATH ALWAYS BEEN
HAVE I BEGUN THIS WONDER SHEEN
WHICH GOD DID SOOTHLY WORK WHILERE
TO MARY'S GLORY WHO HIM BARE.

I will begin about a nun
My verse: God grant me when 't is done
It stand well writ, and every line

Be semblant to the truth divine,
Nothing lacking in no degree,
As Brother Gysbrecht told it me,
A friar who the world forsook;
He found it whylom in his book;
He was an old year-agèd man.
The nun of whom I first began
Was courtly in her manners, nay,
There beth no one still to-day
Like unto her, I ween,
In seemly bearing and in mien.
That I praise her body bright,
Her store of beauty, dear to sight;
That a theme unfitting were.
Yet will I tell you what her care
Was wont to be, for years and more,
In the cloister where she habit wore:
There was she sacristan.
I tell you truly of this nun
She ne'er was late nor made delay,
Neither by night nor by day.

In her work was all her search;
She rang the hours in the church;
She heeded light and ornament,
And did awake the whole convent.

THIS gentle maid was not without
Love, that ranging all about
Worketh wonders without name.
Whylom cometh thereof but shame,
Sorrow and grief and wanhope sad;
Whylom it maketh good and glad.
Even the wise man turneth fool,
And he becomes of love the tool,
Is it him well or woe.
Such its power he cannot know
Whether to speak or hold him still,
To gain thereby of love his will.
Many fall prone at love's own feet,
Who erst rise up when love thinks meet.
Love maketh man of bounty free,

Who, but it were for love's decree,
Had held his treasure to the last.
Eke be there folk of gentle cast,
What they owe, be it great or small,
They share, in love, - their very all:
Wealth and jollity and rue;
Love, like this love, call I true.
I could not teil you all, I ween,
Whether of joy or whether of teen,
That from the rills of love doth run.
Forbear ye, thus, to blame the nun
If that she no escape could gain
From the arms of love that held her ta'en.
For 't is the devil's steadfast aim
Man's heart and body to inflame:
Late and early, day and night,
He brings thereto his utter might.
By base and evil wiles, wherein
He skilled, he lured with fleshly sin
The nun, that she had gladly died.
God she beseeched and sorely cried

That He of his grace would pity her.
She spake: ‘Lo, swich a sufferer
From love am I, and eke so hurt, -
That knows He to whom all is cert,
From whom no marvels hidden lie, -
That of my wits bereft am I.
Another life I straight must lead;
This habit will I quit for need.’

HEAR ye what, after, her befel:
She sent for the youth that pleased her well,
Whereto in her heart she felt such love,
Humbly with a letter, whereof
The meaning was he come with speed,
And it would profit him indeed.
Men came to where the youth did dwell;
He took the letter and read it well,
Which to him sent his little friend.
Then was his sorrow at an end.

He made him haste to come to her,
For, since of age they twelve years were,
Love had ruled betwixt these twain
That oft they suffered many a pain.

WITH all his speed he rode
Cloisterward, where she abode.
To the window then he turned,
Where, if it might be so, he yearned
His love to speak to and to see.
Not long thereafter tarried she:
She hasted her, and soon him found
Before the window that was bound
With iron bars, along and thwart.
Often they sighed in wretched sort,
Since she within and he outside,
Confused by love, must needs abide.
So long awhile they thus wise sate
That I uneath it could relate
How oft her hue waxed sudden pale.

‘Ah, welaway!’ did she bewail,
‘Out-chosen love, me is it woe;
Speak to me a word or so,
And to my heart some comfort do;
Lo, all my trust is unto you.
Love's arrow hath struck in my heart,
That I abye the bitter smart;
And nevermore shall I but grieve,
Till ye, my love, can it out-reave.’

HE gan her answer with impress,
‘Sweetheart, well wot ye happiless
We long have borne the ways
Of love, - yea, all our days;
Nor came we twain to so much bliss
Whereat we might together kiss.
Lady Venus, that divine,
Who put it in your heart and mine,
May God, our Lord, her doom,
That two such buds she lets not bloom,

But sees them wither more and more.
If only I could win you o'er,
And you this habit would forgo,
And unto me a time would show
When I might lead you out from here,
Then would I ride and purchase, dear,
Good woolen clothes, of costly kind,
Which eke with peltry should be lined:
Skirt and surcoat and mantle weed.
Nor reek ye aught of hapless need;
With you I will adventures meet,
Joy and sorrow, the bitter and sweet.
Take for a pledge my faith.'
'Out-chosen friend,' the maiden saith,
'That will I gladly take from you,
And with you so far journey, too,
That in this convent none shall say
Whitherward we have fared away.
From this evening just a week
Come hither and for me seek
Out in this garden fine,

Under an eglantine.
There watch for me, and to your side
I'll come and be your bride,
To go with you where'er ye will,
Save if beset by sudden ill
Or cares that be too much for me:
Withouten fail I'll come to thee;
And, I beseech thee, tell me true
That thou, dear lover, wilt come there, too.'

THEIR troth they gan each other plight.
He took his leave and went forthright
Where ready saddled was his steed.
He mounted up with speed,
And at an amble rode away,
Townward over a grassy lay.
His love not once did he deny,
Next day he went to the mart there by,

And bought him scarlet cloth and blue,
Whereof he then let make all new
A mantle and a great capote,
And a gown and a coat, -
Each of them lined at point device:
No one on goodlier pelt cast eyes,
Worn among women anywhere;
They praised it all that saw it there.
Dagger and girdle and almonier
He bought for her, good and dear;
Caps and finger-rings of gold,
And jewels manifold.
For all those jewels he took good heed
To get whatever a bride should need.
He bare five hundred pounds with him,
And went in the hour of evening dim
Out of the city secretly.
So carried all that treasury
Upon his steed securely dight;
And cloisterward rode forthright
Out to that garden fine,

Under the eglantine.
He sat him down upon the grass
Until his love should that way pass.

OF him will I make as now an end,
And tell you of his gentle friend.
Ere midnight rang she once again
The matins. Love did her great pain.
When the matins had been sung
Both by old and young,
Who thither dwelt in that convent,
And they once more their steps had bent
To the dormter, - all but one, -
Then did she linger there alone
In the choir, and said her prayer,
As she had done so often there.
She kneeled her down before the altar
And spake, the while her lips did falter,
‘Mary, Mother, sweetest name,
‘Now hath my body, to my shame,

To bear this habit no longer power.
Thou knowest well, in every hour,
Man's heart and life, wherever led:
Lo, I have fasted and I have read,
And I have taken discipline;
It's all for nought my pains have been.
For love me under foot hath hurled,
And I perforce must serve the world.
As truly, Lord, as Thou in grief
Wert hangèd, - on each side a thief, -
And on a cross didst suffer wrack,
And Lazarus to life ledst back,
Where he lay sepulchred indeed;
So shouldst Thou know my bitter need,
And all my erring acts forgive,
For I a sinful life must live.'

THEREAFTER out of the choir she went
To an image, and kneeling bent
Before it, and said her prayer,
Where Mary stood immobile there.
She cried, ‘Maria!’ with impress,
‘Day and night did I confess
My trouble great, fulfilled with awe,
Yet is it me no better a straw.
My wits will be me nigh away
If I more in this habit stay.’
Then laid she by her gear in haste,
And on our Lady's altar it placed.
Her shoon she took off too.
Now hear what she shall do:
The key of the sacristy she hung
By th' image of the Virgin young.
And I will tell you truly why
She meant to have it so near by:
If at prime-tide they for it sought

They would find it soon, she thought;
For it is true, since days of yore,
Who Mary's image moves before
That he his eyes thitherward throws,
And utters ‘Ave’ ere he goes,
‘Ave Maria’: of that is she aware,
And that is why she hung it there.

NOW went she in her trouble sad,
Only in a kirtle clad,
To where a door she knew to be.
This she opened craftily,
And secretwise went out,
With silence all about;
Into the garden she went with awe,
And soon thereafter the youth her saw.
He said, ‘Dear lady, have no fear,
It's your friend that ye see here.’
Whenas they both together came,
Then she began to blush with shame

That in a kirtle there she stood,
Bare of foot, without her hood.
He said again, ‘My heart's delight,
'T were better far ye were bedight
With costly clothes, most fair to see.
I prithee be not wroth with me
If that I give you good and fine.’
Then went they under the eglantine,
And all she needed knew he how
To give in plenty full enow.
Of gowns he gave her passing fair;
Blue was it she put on there,
Well-shaped at point device.
He smiled on her in friendly wise;
Then said he, ‘Dear, this heaven-blue
Looks better than that grey on you.’
Two stockings drew she on,
And two shoon of Cordovan,
Which seemlier she found
Than sandals that were bound.
A silken hood and veil of white

He gave her, also, on that night,
Wherewith she straight her head arrayed.
Then the youth kissed the gentle maid
Kindly on her lips so fair:
Him thought, as she stood before him there,
The day had broke indeed.
He turned him quickly to his steed,
He put her on his saddle-bow,
And at an amble fared they so
Till it in sooth began to dawn;
And no one saw where they had gone.
Then it grew lighter in the east.
She said, ‘God, comfort of great and least,
Now must Thou truly us bestead.
I see in the dawn the light of red;
If I had not with you come out,
I should have rung the prime, no doubt,
As I so oft have done,
In the cloister of religion.
I fear this journey I shall rue,
The world I hold so little true.

Though I to it have given me o'er,
It 's like a chapman's store,
Where finger-rings of baser mould
Are falsely given for gold.’

AH, what sayst thou, purest one!
If e'er thou art left deserte alone,
May I with God's anger quake.
Wherever we our way betake
I'll leave thee not, whate'er betide,
Unless us bitter death divide.
How canst thou doubt me, what I mean?
For never hast thou in me seen
Aught of despite or vileinye.
Since that first day I chose out thee
Never a thought my mind hath given,
Nay, to an empress even:
Let grant of such I worthy were,
Love, I'd never leave thee for her.
Believe this surely, as 't is right.
I carry with us, choice and white,

Five hundred pounds of silver here,
Whereof thou shalt be mistress, dear;
And so we fare in many a land,
Yet shall we still have gifts on hand,
Within these seven years or so.'
Thus went they at an amble slow
Until they to a forest came
Where birds made merry with their game.
So loud they warbled their sweet sound
That men might hear it all around,
Each singing after his own kind.
Brightsome flowers you there could find,
Blossoming fair on that green field,
Which daintiest smell did yield.
Pure and clear was the air,
And many trees stood there,
Upright, with leafage thick above.
The fair youth looked upon his love,
For whom he felt such longing sweet.
He said, 'Dear love, is it you meet,
Let's here alight and gather flowers;

Here were it fit to pass the hours
As faithful lovers may.'
'What!' she cried, 'ye'd have me, say,
Here on this field to make me bold,
Like as a woman that wins gold
And basely forfeits her honour's name!
Certes, so had I little shame.
No thought of this had filled your mind,
But that ye were unkind.
Alas! I rue my piteous state!
God give you for this thought His hate!
Be silent further of such words,
And list how in the dale the birds
Sing their songs of mirth and joy.
The less shall you the time annoy
When gently by your side
I lie and am your bride,
To bring your heart delight
Throughout the hours of the night.
Forsooth, well may it sorrow me
Ye reck my love at so light a fee!

HE said, ‘Love, be not angry, - nay,
'T was Venus urged what I did say.
Let come from God derray and pain
If ever I grieve you thus again.’
She said, ‘I forgive it you then.
Ye are my trust above all men
That live or yet shall come.
Though met me here fair Absalom,
And it were granted with him to bide
A thousand years, what might betide,
In rest and joyful ease;
This chance, I swear, would me displease,
For on you, dear, my joy is set,
And you I never could forget,
Let no one think I could.
Nay, if I in heaven stood
And ye in the world here far below,
To come to you I were not slow.
Ah! let not God His anger wreak
That I thus dully chose to speak.

Of heavenly bliss, the littlest bit,
On earth there 's nothing like to it:
There is the least joy so complete
That souls find nothing else so sweet
As to love God ever without end.
All earthly things offend,
The worth they have not of a hair
Beside the smallest blessing there;
And wise they be that turn that way,
How be it I must go astray,
And into great sin wander, too,
Dear, fair lover, all for you.'

THUS they conversed to their avail;
They rode both hill and dale.
Shortly, forsooth, I could not tell
All that betwixt these twain befel.
They rode on at this ambling pace
Forth so far that into a place
They came stood sweetly in a vale,

Which so to please them did not fail
That there they stayed full seven years
In mirth of life, without all tears.
Then each gan other's list obey,
And won together two children they.
After the seven years were past,
And all their pence were gone at last,
Needs must they reek what was on hand
Of treasures brought from out their land.
Clothes and jewels and steed
They sold for half their worth, at need.
Eftsoon, alas! was all away.
Then wist they not what next essay;
Certes, no mantle could she spin
Wherewith their lifehood there to win.
The time in that land was very dear
For food and wine and beer,
And all that eat man gladly would:
Thus there befel them little good;
And liefer had they far been dead
Than fare about and beg for bread.

Great was their trouble, it made them part:
Know ye they did so, heavy at heart.
The man was lacking in good faith;
He left her there, the story saith,
All woe-begone, and went away;
She never saw him from that day.
Yet stayed there yonder in her care
Two children, oh, surpassing fair.

SHE spake: ‘Now there hath come to me
What late and early I feared might be.
Here shall I tarry in trouble sad,
For he hath left me ill-bistad
With whom my life and troth I placed.
Mary, Mother, if that Thou mayst,
For me and my two children cry,
That we of hunger may not die.
What shall I do, me caitiff wife!

Now must I body and inward life
Befleck with the sinful deeds I dread.
Mary, Mother, stand me in stead.
What though a mantle I could spin,
I might not therewith win
In two long weeks a crust;
Perforce then go I must
Beyond the town upon a field
To try what gold my body yield,
And buy me food in wretched sort.
Lo, of honour 't would fall short
To leave my children this plight within.
Thus went she to a life of sin.
For in the tale, parfey, one hears
How for the space of seven years
Into the world she went
A common wife, and lent
Her tender body to greatest shame,
Staining with sin her fairest name.
Little her joy and great her pain:
She did it for a sorry gain

To guard her children well.
What boots it all to tell
Those piteous sins and sore
Within the fourteen years she bore!
Yet left she not, whate'er
Her sorrow was or her despair,
But that she read each day and prayed
The seven hours of the Maid.
So prayed and read to Mary's honour
That all the sins that were upon her
Might lightened be from off her soul,
And she withheld from further dole.

WHENAS the fourteen years were past,
Into her heart God sent at last
Repentance and such pain
That she with a naked sword were fain
Her head were struck off utterly
Rather than more a sinner be

With her fair body, as she had done.
Day and night she made her moan
That her eyes were tearless never.
She said, ‘Maria, Virgin ever,
Fountain above all women blest,
Forsake not me, so hard distressed.
Lady, bethink Thee mercifully
That of my sins it irketh me,
And with them, eke, my heart is sore.
So many they are I know not more
With whom they were, nor where might be.
Alas! oh, what shall become of me!
Well may I fear the Judgment Day, -
God's love from me is hid away, -
When each misprise shall come to light,
Of rich and poor, of every wight;
And all man's sins shall then be wroken,
Save they be free beforehand spoken
With penitence and penance done, -
That know I true for every one.
Forthy am I in much despair.

Although I wore each day a hair,
And crept with it through many lands,
On my feet and on my hands,
Woolen-clad, barefoot without shoe,
Yet, oh, little could I do,
To be of guilt and sorrow free,
Lady, but Thou comfort me.
Fountain above all blessèd joy,
Thou hast saved many from annoy,
As with Theophilus appeared.
He was of sinners the greatest feared,
And to the devil had given him whole,
Both his body and his soul,
And was become his man:
Lady, Thou loosèd'st him the ban.
Albeit I am a caitiff wife
And sunken in a sinful life,
Whatever I did or said,
Lady, bethink Thee I ever read
A prayer to Thy dear honour due:
Oh, show to me Thy pity, too.

Lo me, so sad and full of grief,
And seeking of Thy grace relief!
I ask Thee this and unafraid,
For never was he ill-apayd
Who Thee greeted, Maiden free,
Every day with an Ave Marie.
Who Thee a prayer will gladly read
Let him certain be indeed
That from it there will come amend.
Lady, joy fills Thee without end,
Sweetly chosen bride of God,
For that Thy Son did send abroad
To Nazareth, where one Thee sought,
A greeting like to which was brought
Nor ere that time by mortal heard.
Therefore is the self-same word
Still to thy heart so sweet to hear
That everichone to Thee is dear
Who greets Thee like that one before.
So he with sin were buried o'er,
Yet would'st Thou him to mercy lead

And free before Thy Son him plead.’
This was the plea and this the moan
Uttered each day this sinner prone.
She took her children by the hand
And fared forth with them through the land,
In poverty from place to place,
And lived by begging in heavy case.
So long she wandered all around
That she the cloister once more found
Where years before she was a nun,
And came there after the sun,
Late at even to a widow's cot,
Where, by God's grace, she spared her not
To beg for hostelage that night.
‘To drive you hence were 't scarcely right,’
Said the widow, ‘with your childeren;
It seemeth me they weary ben.
But sit ye all and take ye rest,
And I will share with you distressed
All that our Lord entrusted me
Through His dear Virgin Mother free.’

Thus stayed she with her children twain,
And of the cloister gan she fain
Make question what the other knew.
‘Tell me, good mistress,’ said she, ‘do,
Is this a sisters' convent, say?’
‘It is,’ she answered, ‘by my fey;
'T is richly cherished of God's love,
Nor such another hears one of.
The nuns who habit wear within
I ne'er heard mention made of sin,
Nor aught about them to their shame
Whereof they leastwise might have blame.’

WHO there by her two children sat
Made answer, ‘Whereby know ye that?
I heard agone not many a week
Yet much about one sister speak;
As it remembereth me of her,
Of sacristan she had the care.

Who told me this he did not lie:
It's now some fourteen years aby
That from the cloister she arose
And went her whither no one knows,
Nor in what land she chose abide.'
Then was the widow sorely tried.
She said, 'Think ye I dote!
But cease such foolish tales to quote
About the sacristan in sin,
Else rest ye not this house within.
The blessèd office in this place
She's held for fourteen years the space,
That never was she seen away
The matin's time of even a day,
Out-taken she in sickness were;
And madder he than any cur
Who said of her aught else but good.
Certes, as any virgin should,
She bears a heart of purest thought:
Through all the cloisters though one sought,
Twixt Elba and Girond that lie,

No nun, I ween, he should espy
More seemly lives than she.'

WHO long had laboured sinfully,
To her there seemed a marvel shown.
She said, 'Mistress, make it me known,
How is her father clept, and mother?'
And when she wist the one and other,
That she was meant she knew forthright.
Ah, God! how she wept that night,
Secretwise before her bed!
'No other chance I have,' she said,
'Than that my heart with shame doth grieve;
O Mary, bring my soul reprieve!
My wicked deeds are purgèd not,
And if I saw an oven hot,
With gleeds of fire glowing deep,
And from its mouth with flames a-leap,

Fain were I then to creep therein,
So I were quit of all my sin.
Lord, upon wanhope is thy curse,
So will I trust me not the worse.
Lo me, who not despair of grace,
Howe'er I be, as in this case,
In anguish and beset with fear.
For never was there sinner here,
Since that fair hour Thou cam'st to earth,
And tookest then man's shape and worth,
And suffered'st death upon the Tree,
But right anon Thou would'st him free.
Who sought for grace, in grief and shame,
He found it ever, tho' late he came;
As soothly happened yet again
To the one sinner of the twain
That hung at Thy right side.
Lord, 't is our comfort undenied
That Thou receivèd'st him unchid.
True penitence of care doth rid.
That by this do I plainly see:

For said'st Thou not, “Friend, thou shalt be
In my Kingdom with me to-day,
I tell thee truly, every way.”
Eke, Lord, was it for certain clear,
When Gisamas, the murderer,
At last for blessèd grace did crave,
That then nor gold nor scot he gave,
Nor nought than for his sins distress.
Thy mercy, Lord, is fathomless:
No more let measure it than try
Within one only day to dry
The ocean ways to fallow ground.
Thus was there never sinner found
The equal, Lady, of Thy grace.
Why should I, then, an outcast base,
From Thy dear tenderness be rent, -
So haggard I and penitent!’

As she lay in this her prayer,
Fell a drowse upon her there,
And peacefully she slept and dreamed.
Out of a vision, as it seemed,
A voice there came to her did say,
Whereas asleep she lay,
‘Woman, so long hast thou made thy moan
That Mary to thee hath pity shown,
For She hath prayed thee free.
Go to thy cloister, hastily,
And find the doors all open wide
Whereout thou cam'st at yonder tide
The leman of thy fair young lover,
Who thee left in want to suffer.
All thy habit find thou may'st
Lying upon the altar placed.
Shoon and veil and gear
Thou may'st do on withouten fear.
For this gramercy to Marie,

For of the sacristy the key,
That fore the image thou did'st lay
That stilly night thou went'st away,
E'er hath She warded it so well,
All of these fourteen years the spell,
That thy forthfaring no one wist,
Nor aught else of thy presence missed.
Throughout the time that thou hast swerved,
Mary, herself, for thee hath served,
Thee in the full likeness of:
That hath the Maiden from above,
Sinner, done because of thee.
She wills thee to the cloister flee;
No one thou'lt find upon thy bed, -
It is from God what hath been said.'

THEREAFTER, but a moment's part,
From out her sleep she did astart.
She said: 'O Jesu, mighty Lord,
Let not the devil's ill accord

Into more wretchedness me bring,
Than yet to me is happening!
If to the cloister I were sent,
And like a thief, paraunter, hent,
Then were I brought to greater shame
Than when the convent I outcame.
I beseech Thee, God the good,
By Thy dear precious blood
That from Thy side outburst;
If the voice that hailed me erst
Hither hath come for my avail,
Let it return withouten fail
Another time beside me here,
And yet a third time, plain and clear,
To bid me now, withouten mo,
Back again to my cloister go.
Then will I worship all my days
The Virgin's name and Her up-raise.'

HEAR ye, upon that other night
There came to her a voice forthright,
That called to her and still did say,
‘Woman, too long wilt thou delay.
Go back to thy cloister fearlessly;
God will surely comfort thee.
Do Mary's bidding, - thou knowest what, -
It is Her message, doubt it not.’
Now hath she heard it yet again,
The voice that called her clear and plain
And to the cloister urged her still;
Yet durst she not the hest fulfil.
The third night lay this laggard sweet,
And pondered, ‘Is it elves' deceit
O'ercomes me here so late?
Ah, let me then as quickly mate
The fiend's power and his despite!
And so he come to me to-night,
Lord, as do him so confus

That from his might this house he loose,
Nor set me evermore aghast.
Mary, have ruth on me at last!
And if the voice from Thee was sent,
That bade me enter my convent,
I pray Thee, Lady, by Thy Son,
It come again, as it hath done.'
Then lay she watching, soft and still.
A voice there came of God's own will,
Along with an overgreat light,
And said, 'Thou doest not aright
That wilt my hest in all defy;
For Mary's messager am I.
Too long wilt thou delay;
Go to the cloister yet to-day:
Thou'lt see the doors all open wide;
Go where thee list on every side.
Thy habit find thou mayst
Lying upon the altar placed.'
When the voice so much had said,
Might the sinner on her bed

With own eyes see the heavenly glore.
She spake: ‘Now need I doubt no more;
The voice it hath but God obeyed,
And is a message from the Maid.
That may I believe without all teen,
For it hath come with light so sheen.
Forthy no longer I forbear,
But to the cloister will repair;
And I will do it in good faith,
For trust of the words our Lady saith,
And will my children both the twain,
To God, our Father, yield again;
He will them care for as He knows.’
Then spared she not with her own clothes
To cover them and comfort make,
Silently that they might not wake.
She kissed them on the lips, the two;
She said, ‘Children, farewell to you.
For trust of the words our Lady saith
I here will leave you in good faith.
Yet had not Mary prayed me this,

I would not give you o'er, I-wis,
For all the wealth that's Rome within.'
Hear ye what now she shall begin.

NOW goes she thenceward making moan
Toward the cloister all alone.
When to the garden she had won,
She found the door was ope as soon.
She went therein without delay.
'Mary,' she said, 'have thanks alway
That I have come within this wall;
God grant me that no ill befal.'
Where'er she came she found each door
Did open to her as of yore.
To the church she her betook
And in secret thus she spoke:
'God, Master, I beseech that Thou
Wilt help me to my habit now,
Which I let, fourteen years aby,

Upon our Lady's altar lie,
At night, whenas I fled away.'
Hear ye, 't is not a lie I say,
It is the truth ye hear:
Shoon and veil and gear
In the self same place she found
Where she agone had laid them down.
She drew them on with haste
And uttered: 'God in heaven placed,
And Mary, Maiden pure and free,
Forever blessèd shall ye be.
Thou art of every virtue flower;
In Thy clean virgin hour
Thou bar'st a child, without all woe,
That Lord shall be forever mo.
Thou art our pledge above all worth;
Thy child did make the heaven and earth.
This power from God hath come to Thee,
And stands at Thy behest forthy.
The Lord, who is our Brother,
Thy bidding mayst Thou ask as Mother,

And He Thee precious Daughter call,
That I am comforted withal.
Whoe'er from Thee will grace await
Shall find it sure, though come he late.
Thy help I know is measureless:
Though I had sorrow and distress,
Yet such a change is wrought by Thee
That I am now of sorrow free, -
Oh, rightly may I praise Thy name.'
The key of the sacristy, the same,
Was hanging fore the Virgin young,
Where years before she had it hung.
Upon herself she hung the key,
And choirward went where she did see
Clear lamps in every corner burn.
Then to the books she gan her turn,
And in its place she laid each one,
As, oft before that, she had done.
The Virgin Mary prayed she, too,
That yet no harm might her undo;
And eke her children that were left

At the widow's house, so sore bereft.
Within this had the night so passed
The clock began to strike at last,
That one the midnight hour kenned.
She took the bell-rope by the end
And rang the matins so amain
They heard it on all sides again
Who there above in the dormter lay.
Then gan they file below straightway
Down from the dormter, one and all.
They wist of it nor great nor small:
In the cloister all that time she stayed
Without reproach or foul upbraid.
Mary had ever served for her
As she her very self it were.
Thus changed this sinner her piteous ways,
To Mary's honour, whom men praise,
The Maiden of the heaven high
Who always faithfully is by,
And stands her friends in goodly stead,
Who with distress are burdenèd.

THIS gentle maid, as I have heard,
Is nun, as she was formerward.
Now will I not forget so eft
Her children twain, which that she left
At the widow's house so ill-bistad,
For neither bread nor gold they had.
I could not tell enow, I ween,
When they their mother have not seen,
How sore and bitterly they cried.
The widow sat her by their side
For pity of their heaviness.
She said, ‘Now to the good abbess
With these two children will I start;
God shall put it into her heart
That she will not withhold them boon.’
Then put she on their clothes and shoon,
And to the convent with them went.
She said, ‘Lady, be thou attent
Unto the need of these two wight.
The mother in this heavy plight

Hath left them at my house ere day,
And now hath farèd forth her way,
Where, east or west, she hath not said;
And they are thus uncomforted.
But wist I how, I'd help them fain.'
The abbess answered her again,
'Care for them well, - ye shall have meed,
Nor ever ill shall it you speed
That one hath left them with you so.
Men shall them gifts of love bestow
Each day, for God's sweet sake.
Bid someone here himself betake,
Who them shall fetch to drink and eat;
If lacks them aught let me it weet.'
The widow then was pleasèd well
That such good hap to her befel.
She took the children with her there,
And had of them the goodly care.
Who them had given suck, - the mother,
And suffered pain for one and other,
Her heart was blithe indeed

When that she wist them given heed,
Her children, which she had fordone
In heavy plight and from them gone.
She had nor fear nor trouble sore
For her two children ever more.
A holy life henceforth she led;
Yet many sighs and many a dread
She had both night and day,
For anguish in her heart that lay
Of all her sins, the foul and quade,
Which to make known she was afraid
Or them uncover to any wight,
Whether to speak or them endyte.

HEREAFTER came there on a day
An abbot, for it was his way
To pay them visit once a year,
As who would learn if there were here
Any report or evil fame
Whereof mayhap they might have blame.

Upon this day when he was come,
Then lay this sinner wearisome
Within the choir and read her prayer,
In great misgiving and despair.
The devil still to tempt her sought,
That she the sinful deeds she wrought
Before the abbot might not bring.
Now as she lay thus pondering,
She saw how passed there by a knight
Was clothèd utterly in white.
He bare a naked child in his arm,
Whose hue of death did her alarm.
He threw an apple up and down
And caught it ere it fell to ground
Before the child and made it game.
The maiden saw what, there, became,
Where in her prayer she lay,
And said, ‘Friend, if it happen may
That thou from God art come to me,
Then I beseech by His decree
Thou hide it not, but truly say'st

Why thou before the child play'st
With that fair apple, bright and red,
And in thy arm he lieth dead.
Thy game doth him in naught avail.'
'Certes, nun, thou answerest well.
Aught of my game he cannot know,
Neither little nor mo,
He 's dead, and hears and sees me not.
All like to him, God knows no jot
That thou dost read and fast:
That will not help thee at the last;
'T is trouble lost, nor aught will win
For that thou takest discipline.
Thou art in sin so stifled o'er
That God doth hear thy prayers no more,
In His kingdom there on high.
I rede thee that thou hastily
To thy father the abbot turn,
And let him altogether learn
Of each misprise, of one and all:
Be not henceforth the devil's thrall.

The abbot shall absolve thee straight
Of foul sins that thee so bait.
But if thou wilt not of them speak,
Heavy God's hand that shall them wreak.'
The youth went then from out her eyes,
Nor more revealed in any wise.
All that he said she not forgot.
Next day she went, ere other what,
To the abbot, and would he heard
Her penitence from word to word.
The abbot in his heart was seer;
He said to her, 'My child, my dear,
To thee I am no shrinking friend;
Bethink thee well, from first to end,
Of all thy sins, of every one.'
And at this moment gan the nun
The holy abbot sit beside,
And to him all her deeds confide
Her life from the beginning of:
How that she with a foolish love
Confusèd was in such degree

That she must needs let lying be
Her habit, with much fear and falter,
One night upon our Lady's altar;
And with a man the cloister fled
Who won two children of her bed.
All that her ever had befel
She spared her not to note it well.
Of aught was in her heart attaint,
She made the abbot full acquaint.
When her confession she had done,
The abbot spake, the holy one:
‘Daughter, I will absolve thee straight
Of all the sins thou dost relate,
Whereof so much thou wast afflict.
Let praisèd be and benedict
God's blessèd Virgin Mother!’
He laid his hand upon the other,
Upon her head, and pardoned her.
He said, ‘In sermon good it were
I made full clear thy history;
But yet so careful shall I be

That thou and eke thy children twain
Forever shall not hear again
The shame of it, in thy despite.
To guard it close, it were not right,
This miracle which that our Lord
Unto His Mother did accord.
I would that it be sanctified,
And hope that there shall, thee beside,
Many a sinner turn his ways
And our dear blessèd Lady praise.'

HE let them know, - the whole convent, -
Or ere from thence he homeward went,
How that it with a nun befel;
Yet could there no one tell
Who that she was, - that still was hid.
The abbot left, as God did bid.
The nun's two children tended he,

And bore them in his company.
He put grey habit on them then,
And they became two holy men.
Their mother's name was Beatrice.
Praise due to God and honour is,
And Mary eke, who God did bear
And wrought this miracle so fair:
She holp the nun in her distress.
Now pray we all, both more and less,
Who have this miracle heard read,
That Mary surely us bestead,
And plead for us in that sweet vale
Where God shall judge us without fail.

AMEN.